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NEWS

Unitarian Society target of repeated vandalism, officials say cause is racial

NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY | STAFF WRITER

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The three flags and flagpole at the Winchester Unitarian Society on Main Street have been repeatedly vandalized since 2018, despite upgraded security measures. COURTESY PHOTO/WINCHESTER UNITARIAN SOCIETY

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"Frustrating, disturbing and offensive." That's how Rev. Heather [illegible] describes the ongoing vandalism of the Black Lives Matter flag at the

Winchester Unitarian Society, where she has been pastor since 2015.

The church first raised the BLM flag in 2018 following a special meeting held by the entire congregation in support of racial justice. A Pride Progress flag, as well as an American flag, were already flying at the 478 Main St. location.

“It was intentional,” Janules said, of the Jan. 7, 2018 meeting. “It wasn’t about just hanging a banner. It was a reflection of our deeper commitment to racial justice.”

In the six years that have followed, however, the BLM flag has been stolen, pulled down and vandalized. But so have the Pride flags, as well as the flagpoles.

The latest incident was earlier last month, when someone took both the BLM and Pride flags and then took the U.S. flag and re-hung it upside down on the flagpole.

“The Pride flag was old and worn and it was due to be replaced anyway,” Janules said. “For a time, this was happening repeatedly. For a while, we even had a frame that said, ‘All have inherent worth…even the people taking our flags.’”

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The sign put up by the Winchester Unitarian Society after repeated vandalism to its flags. COURTESY PHOTO/WINCHESTER UNITARIAN SOCIETY

The church has spent about $350 on replacement flags and poles, which they order in bulk. And while that may not seem like a lot, church officials say the real cost is the poles, which are expensive to repair and continually replace. It also doesn't account for the cost of security cameras and monthly costs for 24/7 video coverage of the inside and exteriors of the building.

And it's not just the flags. The church playground has been vandalized with homophobic graffiti and slurs.

Janules called the repeated vandalism a "nuisance."

"We installed the cameras to get a sense if it was one person or multiple people," she said, of the increased security measures. "And we've

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stretches where the flags have remained unmolested. Then it happens and stops. It has its own rhythm."

And despite the cameras, she said in December of 2022, one man drove up to the church on a Wednesday morning and tried pulling the BLM flag down. When he was unsuccessful, he went back to his truck to grab his tools to remove the flag.

"Then he shook his finger at our camera and got back in his truck and drove away," Janules said. "He had covered his license plate."

The church rededicated the flag during Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day in January 2023. But the case of who the mysterious man was has never been solved.

Not just Winchester

While some might blame kids for the vandalism, Janules said that's the easy way out.

"It's definitely not kids," she said. "You could say it's one or two kids blowing off steam, but I see this as a focused vandalism."

And it's not just happening in Winchester. There have been similar issues at churches of the Unitarian Universalist denomination in both Reading and Arlington.

Reading's BLM flag was stolen on June 19 of last year, which marks Juneteenth, a federal holiday in the United States commemorating the ending of slavery. That was replaced with a new banner and in early March 2024, the community held an interdenominational service to reflect on the meaning behind the event.

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A sign at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Reading after its BLM flag was taken. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

In Arlington, a man vandalized a BLM banner in the middle of the day. In that incident, witnesses got his license plate and the man was arrested. The church, however, decided not to press charges if the man would agree to participate in a restorative justice program, in which those harmed by a crime explain how their lives have been changed by the action to the offender.

“In 2019, we realized that it was happening in other congregations,” Janules said.

She further quoted her colleague, the Rev. Carlton Eliot Smith, himself a Black man: “If people are doing that to a church, imagine what they might do to someone walking around in black skin.”

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Neither the Anti-Defamation League nor the NAACP Mystic Valley Branch track specific incidents targeted at BLM flags. However, spokespeople at both said they are aware this type of vandalism does happen.

Shellie Burgman, spokesperson for ADL New England, said the group last year released reports on the rise of white supremacist propaganda in Massachusetts as well as antisemetic incidents.

According to the report from the ADL Center on Extremism, white supremacist propaganda distribution has reached "historic levels" across the United States in 2023, a 12% increase from the previous year, with about 20 incidents a day. Anti-LQBTQ+ propaganda incidents have increased 141% in that same time span.

"In Massachusetts, ADL recorded 339 incidents of white supremacist propaganda, as compared to 465 incidents in 2022," the report reads. "Massachusetts ranked fifth for most white supremacist propaganda incidents in the country. A total of 137 towns and cities across Massachusetts experienced an incident."

"We remain concerned about the high levels of white supremacist propaganda incidents in Massachusetts which have grown exponentially in recent years," said Ron Fish, ADL New England interim regional director. "There were 339 recorded incidents in 2023 in Massachusetts compared to 11 incidents in 2017. White supremacist propaganda aims to instill fear in marginalized communities and recruit others to their hateful cause, all while hiding behind the cloak of anonymity."

BLM banner meaning

Black Lives Matter is a political and social movement seeking to [illegible] racism, discrimination and racial inequality experienced by Black people.

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The movement has been primarily concerned with incidents of police brutality and racially motivated incidents.

The BLM movement began in July 2013 on social media with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the controversial shooting of 17-year-old African American Trayvon Martin in February 2012 in Sanford, Fla. following an altercation.

The movement grew with demonstrations nationwide following the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. and Eric Garner in New York City. In 2020, the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer further inflamed protestors.

A Black Lives Matter protest in Central Square in Cambridge on December 2014 drew thousands. COURTESY PHOTO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/TIM PIERCE OF BERLIN, MA

A New York Times story in July 2020 estimated that 15 million to 26 million people participated in the 2020 BLM protests in the U.S., making it one of the largest movements in the country's history.

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To show support, BLM flags and banners went up in communities and have remained in place. In the wake of Floyd's murder, Janules said residents asked if they could hold a vigil at the church.

"We agreed," she said. "It was a powerful gathering. The police attended, not in uniform, and in a supportive manner."

Former Winchester police chief, Peter MacDonnell, was in charge at the time of the vigil.

Janules was also quick to point out that the flags are not signs of being anti-police. In fact, she's had conversations with current Winchester Police Chief Daniel O'Connell to reassure him of that. And, she added, the Winchester Police have responded to every incident at the church since the vandalism began.

O'Connell could not be reached for comment on the various incidents at the church.

What's next?

As occurrences of hate and vandalism continue to rise not only across the nation, but in Massachusetts, Janules said it's clear the reasons behind the BLM movement are still as prevalent today as in 2013.

"It may be time to come back to the conversation, not with the police, but as a community," she said. "The tension still remains."

Janules said in recent years, there's been a definite sense that people who are hostile towards marginalized communities feel free to continue unabated.

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"They feel free to be anti-queer, anti-Black," she said. "It's done in the dark of night, not wanting to get caught and they feel no sense of shame."

Janules said when Pride flags were taken down after the town itself raised them at Town Hall for Pride Month, residents were angered. It's been the same with the church.

"There is a sense of support for us," she said. "Our experience with the police, for example, has been positive. People are receptive to our concerns and they want to live in a supportive community."

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The U.S. flag was taken down by vandals in March 2024 and re-hung upside down during an incident at the Winchester Unitarian Society on Main Street. COURTESY PHOTO/WINCHESTER UNITARIAN SOCIETY

But she is angered and frustrated by what feels like a continual barrage of vandalism.

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"I'm of two minds," she said. "On one hand, it's akin to someone taking the cross off a Christian church because when you violate a house of worship, it's like you're attacking their beliefs. I find it offensive and disturbing.

"You're trying to do other meaningful things in the community and you have to keep rehanging and re-establishing the flags," she continued. "It's really frustrating."

But then she remembers why it's important for the church to keep going.

"Our preference is to be people who affirm the humanity of queer people and Black people," she said. "This is a reminder of why the flags are needed. Yes, it's a pain to keep doing it, but the message needs to be sent. It's one part frustration and one part encouragement."

This story has been updated to clarify and correct names of church and Winchester officials.

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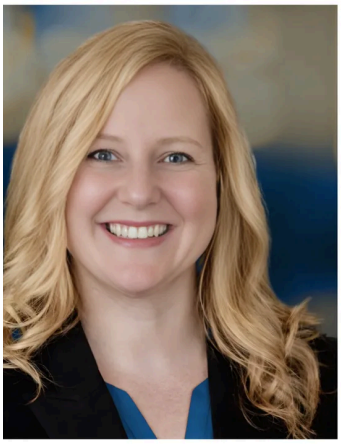

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Public safety data How Winchester compares on firearms licenses in comparable Massachusetts communities Active licenses as of Jan. 25, 2025 — Source: Massachusetts Criminal History Systems Board License to carry firearms Firearms identification card Winchester and Marblehead are the focus communities. Peers selected based on comparable population size, demographics and suburban

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By Talia Ho | Correspondent Fame. Fortune. And all that jazz. This spring, Winchester High School presents “Chicago: Teen Edition,” a bold musical that explores celebrity culture, media manipulation, and the cost of ambition. This iconic production is set in the 1920s. Performances will take place on March 13 and 14

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Welcome Here’

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